Yisrael Stern Lectures in Plonsk

One day, Yisrael Stern entered the "Haor" society and in a low, slightly stuttering voice, asked for forgiveness: "He had a request for us. He wanted to give a few lectures at "Haor". His appearance was repulsive; unshaven, dressed in rags, shoes in a terrible state – there was straw sticking out and they were tied together with string. Who was he? What was he? He was called such and such, he was a poet, he wrote poems in Yiddish. His name meant nothing, and his poems were unheard of. What was there to do? How could such a neglected figure such as this appear on stage before an audience?

After drinking a cup of hot tea, he recovered a little, and spoke briefly about his life, his troubles and what he had suffered since [WW1] had broken out… he was assured that his request would be discussed at the committee meeting to take place that evening. He left, and a short while later we heard he had been imprisoned… Only later that evening did we manage to release him from German hands. He was tired, weak, and emotionally defeated. At the committee meeting that night it was decided, following many deliberations, not to dismiss him outright, but to let him give a lecture the following evening. There was not enough time to publicize the event properly, so only a few people turned up for the lecture, but those who came had no reason to regret it. When Stern entered the hall, they looked at him in wonder as if to ask: "What can this guy tell us?" But when he opened his mouth – he lectured about Y. L. Peretz and his works – the atmosphere turned simply magical. Members of "Haor" had heard fine lectures on literature, but they had never heard anything like this one: it was a song in prose, a work of expert craftsmanship in every way…

The audience sat spellbound, and when he finished, the roles were reversed. Now, it was not him, Stern, that was making the request, but his listeners who asked him to repeat the lecture and give others. Stern of course didn't refuse, and within a week had given three more lectures. This time, not only the hall but all the rooms in "Haor" were packed to the rafters. For many years, Stern remembered his visit to our town, and each time he saw someone from Plonsk in Warsaw, he would repeat how his visit had been like a ray of light in the darkness that had enveloped him at that time.

Meanwhile, he came out of anonymity, his poems appeared in the most important publications, his anthology "Mibeit Hacholim" (From the Hospital) engendered great interest and critics viewed him as one of the greatest future prospects for Yiddish poetry.

Yisrael Stern died in the Warsaw ghetto.

Meir Finkelstein and Rivka Shahar, Sefer Plonsk, pp. 211-212, 265